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Extremism, Conflict, Security, and the State in Africa

Symposium organized by the Cornell Institute for African Development (IAD)

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Call for Abstracts Deadline: June 30th, 2016

Abstract

The Cornell Institute for African Development (IAD) is holding a symposium on the theme, "Development, Religious Extremism, Conflict, Security, and the State in Africa," April 15–16, 2015, on the Cornell University campus. The symposium will explore the complex and multidimensional issues of development and security in their broadest sense as well as the fundamental underpinnings of conflict through an inter-disciplinary approach.

The new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by world leaders at the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, 2015, set out a universal agenda to eradicate extreme poverty from the face of the earth by 2030 and to deliver on the promise of sustainable development. The Goals are listed as follows:

- a) move from reducing to ending extreme poverty, in all its forms;
- b) ensure that no person, regardless of ethnicity, gender, geography, disability, race, or other status is denied basic economic opportunities and human rights;
- c) integrate the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability and act now to slow the alarming pace of climate change and environmental degradation;
- d) transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth;
- e) build peace and effective, open, and accountable institutions for all and build new partnerships based on a spirit of solidarity, cooperation, mutual accountability, common understanding of our shared humanity, and mutual respect and benefit for all.

The UN High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda recognized freedom from conflict and violence as the most fundamental human entitlement and an essential foundation for building peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable societies. Insecurity strikes at the very core of right to life. Where high levels of insecurity prevail, efforts to achieve the outlined goals are bound to fail. Conflicts can cause terrifyingly direct consequences: people killed, diseases spread, infrastructure destroyed, and members of a society reduced to homeless refugees. Conflicts are a major cause of poverty, underdevelopment, and ill health in developing countries and thereby directly undermine development goals. Insecurity not only causes poverty but also increases the cost of economic transactions, disrupts economic activity and food production, and severely disrupts healthcare systems, thereby spreading disease. It breaks down communities and induces forced migration, as the recent unprecedented immigration from conflict zones into Europe demonstrates. It is almost impossible for private capital, which is one of the linchpins of the new sustainable development goals, to contribute to development in conflict states.

Conflicts are caused by a variety of factors, including ethnic rivalries, disputes over resources, and religious extremism. Explaining the spread of extremism, some argue that such movements offer values, economic support, and a sense of community that are attractive—especially to the young and disenfranchised—in power vacuums and in areas where corrupt governance is the norm. Conflict and fragility have a mutually reinforcing relationship, which in turn perpetuates poverty and undermines the quality of life.

Human security in its broadest sense embraces far more than the absence of violent conflict. It encompasses human rights, good governance, access to education and health care, and the assurance that each individual will have opportunities and choices to fulfill his or her potential. The reduction of conflict is essential to the achievement of inclusive development as advocated in the Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusive development should reduce inequalities between groups, tackle unemployment and illicit trade, and thereby reduce the private incentives to fight.

The above paragraphs raise a number of issues. What are the underlying economic and social causes of conflict? Does foreign intervention help or complicate a conflict? What is the impact of religious extremism and culture on conflict and development? How do we fix the economic, political, and security problems that disrupt development and trap fragile states in cycles of violence? How does conflict impact on women and children? How do we strengthen national institutions and improve governance in ways that prioritize citizen security, justice, jobs, and food security? Conflicts may confer benefits as well as costs on individuals; in what ways might this happen?

In attempting to answer these questions, the symposium seeks to expand the understanding of the complex and multidimensional issue of development and security. The understanding of conflict is directly related to our ability to manage, resolve, and prevent its creation.

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